

Sequoyah Hills Presbyterian Church
Knoxville, Tennessee
Rev. Rachel Hamburger
June 7, 2020

“When Going Gets Tough: Doing Right”
1 Peter 3:13-18

It's Trinity Sunday (on the church calendar), and I couldn't help but notice how Peter in this letter begins with the Trinity. In 1 Peter 1:2-3, he writes to **those, to us**, “who have been chosen by God the Father, and sanctified by the Spirit, to be obedient to Jesus Christ and to be sprinkled with his blood.” Please join me in prayer.

Father, Son and Holy Spirit, thank you for this enormous work you have done, you are doing, in us. As we listen to your Word, here, and at home, wherever we are, we know that you will speak to us. Amen.

Reading from **1 Peter 3:13-18**.

From my college years, there are some things I especially remember like the Chapel services where we sang hymns like Andrew and Matthew just did, with fervor. I remember that my roommates and I invented Oreo Cookie Ice Cream, or we thought we had. I also remember a conversation in my freshman year with my friend Brian, who told me that he had memorized the book of 1 Peter. I said, “You're kidding right? That's five chapters!” That became a challenge for me.

Forty years later, I continue to be astounded at the words, what there is to be discovered in this letter. 1 Peter was a circular letter written to Christians scattered throughout five provinces at the eastern extremity of the Roman empire. There were some Jews, but many Gentiles who were very new to the faith and already facing hard times. Emperor Nero's violence against Christians mostly then was confined to Rome; but that persecution would begin to spread. Mainly, 1 Peter reflects that kind of persecution inflicted by fellow citizens, bringing social ostracism and, as Peter writes, maligning, reviling, and mistreatment.

Commentary writer Fred Craddock draws from historian Ramsay MacMullen who estimated that there were, at the close of the first century about 40,000 believers in an empire of 70 million, a minority even where the churches thrived. Bearing the name of Christian brought social ostracism and various kinds of abuse. “Who were these people?”

How were Christians to respond to this abuse, mistreatment? What were they to do? Peter calls them to continue doing right, in verses 13, 14, 16, 17, to continue doing “good,” a good that was not always appreciated, understood, given back, a good that sometimes-brought suffering.

In John's Gospel we read “light has come into the world, and people loved darkness rather than light because their deeds were evil. For all who do evil hate the light ...” Peter knew the danger of doing right/good in a pagan culture. But he says to keep at it.

In the mid 1980's I had the privilege of going with a group to visit Christians in former Communist East Germany. We entered West and then East Berlin as tourists, and then drove on to visit several congregations, usually staying with each about 4 days, having coffee and conversation and Bible study, taking long walks, praying and worshipping together, learning about their situation under communism, sharing, to their great interest, what the church was doing in America. All of this was kept very quiet so as not to further endanger these Christians. Life held a lot of danger for them. Communism was out to eradicate the faith, to make life a lot harder for those who sought to live under the Lordship of Jesus Christ. Adults, youth, and children were put under pressure, in all kinds of ways. Unbelieving neighbors and work colleagues were turning in neighbors to the secret police.

I'll never forget a man who shared of his work in a factory. His supervisor told them they would now be using inferior parts in the products. When they refused to comply, there might be a demotion or job loss or other form of discrimination; or all of a sudden, the name of a 17-year old son or daughter would be put on a black list denying the child access to university education. Doing the right thing cost them. Siding with Jesus cost their families. I remember the children, they were lovely; many came to understand, even partly, the hard choices their parents had to make as Christians; this "formed" them.

Peter's words "if any of you suffers as a Christian, do not consider it a disgrace, but glorify God because you bear His name." How many times, places in our world have people borne His name? The Christians in Germany, Poland, Holland, France who defied government dictate and hid Jewish people. Those in our own nation, thousands, who have taken the Gospel out into the world, those who have given their lives for freedom and peace and the "right" (yesterday was the 76th anniversary of D-day), those who fought for basic humanity, like Rosa Parks and Martin Luther King, and who paid the price. Those who did right and good as they knew how.

Some of us may remember how in 1989 many Christians in East Germany marched peacefully, with prayer, and at night with candles. The swell of thousands on the streets, yearning for something different, for air, for freedom, for life for all as it's supposed to be, from God and for God.

What does doing right in our day mean? I'm trying to answer that question myself. I know many of you have and are walking this walk, in large and small ways, the integrity you've lived, the care and contributions you've made, the decisions you've had to make in your professions, in your families and circles of influence, your neighborhoods.

In these days, these COVID days, there are so many people "doing right" for others, making hard, sacrificial decisions, health care workers, first responders, the police force, service workers, business owners, leaders. In these days of struggle on the streets of our nation, there are scores of everyday people doing right and good, many with faith, at least the seeds of faith, and sacrifice.

On Thursday I received a text from a friend, she's 28, a schoolteacher who used to be my neighbor and has moved to New York City. She is not a part of organized religion, and has been resistant to it. Her text Thursday asked (humbly) if would I consider making contribution to one of the many organizations working for equality for all people, specifically one close to her heart, that teaches children. Her request really moved me. One who does not know how she feels about God (yet), but somehow cares for what God cares about.

Conversations with friends as of late asking, how do we “do right” in this time? Maybe it’s a daily question. Maybe it starts with just **seeing**, getting ourselves into a place where we **can see** others. Being sad, and rightly sad. Praying, and rightly praying. Living with intention. Living to bless, as we have been blessed. *It is for this that you were called*, writes Peter. And when you are asked why you live as you do, says Peter, tell them it is about Jesus, and your hope in Him. And your desire to follow Him, who, being God Himself, walked this very same road, always did right and suffered greatly for it, never backed down, spoke against evil but never returned evil for evil, never stopped wanting to know and do God’s will, was always for others, one by one, bringing them to the Father. Doing it all with deep love to relieve sin and suffering, which brought him suffering and then glory. For Christ also **died** for sins once for all. The righteous for the unrighteous that he might bring us to God.

Fred Craddock writes (I paraphrase a bit), “when Believers were pressed ... discouraged, weary of doing right, anxious, looking out on all the brokenness, looking for meaning Peter’s best response is to point them to the cross and the empty tomb.”

Peter had been there. Crushed by the crucifixion, and then utterly transformed by the resurrection, and utterly transformed in his understanding of the Gospel. How Great is the Hope, the promise we’ve been promised in Jesus, that God will make all things right? And one day, the God of all grace, who has called you to his eternal glory in Christ, will himself restore, establish, strengthen, and settle you.

Peter would himself be crucified for his faith in Jesus, Jesus who is laced through this letter of hope for people who needed to hear this in their day, and ours.

He writes, “In your hearts sanctify Christ as Lord” and keep on! **Amen.**